

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

Symphony No. 6 in E minor

- I. *Allegro*
- II. *Moderato*
- III. *Scherzo: allegro vivace*
- IV. *Epilogue: moderato*

The Sixth Symphony was composed between 1944 and 1947 and first performed on 21 April 1948 conducted by Boult. Its starting-point was a theme composed for, but not used in, the wartime film *Flemish Farm* (1943). Another of its themes was intended for some incidental music for Shakespeare's *King Richard II*. The point is significant because Vaughan Williams had begun to write film music in 1940. He enjoyed it and found it had a liberating effect on his imagination and encouraged him to make more extravagant use of the orchestra. The Sixth caused a sensation and was performed 100 times in two years. Something like that had not occurred in English music since Elgar's First Symphony in 1908. It exploded into our ears in 1948, its beginning like an avalanche. It has a slow movement in which an insistent, Shostakovich-like three-note motif grows menacingly louder as if describing the relentless approach of some monstrous apparition. The *scherzo* is like a hell's kitchen of jazz and wailing saxophones. Then it suddenly fizzles out into little fragments of sound and moves into a *finale* which never rises above a whisper, a Waste Land, yet with an oboe projecting a ghostly ray of hope (perhaps?) before the music dwindles away into oblivion.

Surely there was an external programme here? It's a war symphony, critics said, the first post-Hiroshima symphony, a world laid waste by atomic warfare. Malcolm Sargent said the *scherzo* described the night during the war when a bomb hit the Café de Paris in London, killing the band and dozens of dancers. Again, the composer angrily denied it. "Can't a man just write a piece of music?" All he would say was that the *finale* could best be summed up in Prospero's words from *The Tempest*: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded by a sleep". He liked the description of it as "an agnostic's *Paradiso*". So where does that leave us? Most safely with the music itself, undoubtedly one of his most masterly creations from every point of view. As a musical argument, it is taut and technically fascinating, as a drama – take it how you like. The first movement contains one of the richest and most romantic melodies he ever wrote, an extraordinary contrast to the violence around it. The orchestration throughout is expansive, virtuosic, magniloquently expressive. The musicologist, the late Deryck Cooke, was at the first performance. Its effect on him was "nothing short of cataclysmic". At the end "every drop of blood seemed frozen in one's veins".

The symphony is constructed from the opposition of major and minor thirds, the interval of the augmented fourth and a conflict of tonalities. It inaugurated the prolific and fruitful 15-year creative spell which ended in the year of Vaughan Williams's death with another symphony in E minor, his Ninth, yet it is a transition work in that it links his pre-1939 and post-1945 music. It is a kind of personal retrospective, acknowledging the influence of Holst, particularly 'Mars' and 'Neptune' from *The Planets*, and harking back (almost by way of thematic quotation) to his one-act opera *Riders to the Sea*, composed in the 1920s and another study in tragic desolation. When the symphony appeared, audiences just released from the anxieties of war into the anxieties of peace, recognised its reflection of a deep spiritual struggle.

The *Allegro* opens precipitately and dramatically with a clash of E minor and F minor. The music then becomes restless and jaunty, with prominent saxophone and side-drum. A 'close-harmony' type of tune lends a jazzy flavour. The 'official' second subject, in a modal B minor, is concerned, as are other themes, with the augmented fourth in alternations of major and minor. The development section maps this lyrical melody's efforts to gain ascendancy, culminating in its enunciation by the full brass and later in its romantic transformation to E major for strings over chords for harps and trombones. Back comes the ferocity of the opening, but this subsides to an emphatic chord on the lower strings which merges into the beginning of the second movement on trumpets. Here the argument is between themes a semitone apart. A tense expectancy is heightened by the emergence of a three-note rhythmic figure, ominously reiterated on trumpets and drums. Four times this builds up to a furious climax. When its passion is spent, the cor anglais utters a lament and the drums rumble quietly before the *Scherzo* erupts in a noisy display of fugal energy.

The clatter of xylophones adds to the *scherzo's* exhilarating frenzy. The trio brings little respite, its saxophone tune later becoming a sarcastic march. The way to the *scherzo* repeat is found by a succession of descending augmented fourths, accompanied by violins *tremolandi*. The movement loses its momentum and disintegrates, and the *Epilogue* begins. This is directed to be played *pianissimo, senza crescendo*. The composer described it as 'whiffs of theme drifting about.' Tonality veers between E and F. There is a sighing phrase for brass and strings and an oboe elegy. Finally, violins and violas alternate chords of E minor and E major while pizzicato cellos and basses recall the movement's main theme. The music drifts from our hearing toward an unknown region.

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